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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, MARCH 22-28, 2008

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

12. (SBU) Choreography of an Interpretive Dance: Socialist Party Leader Edi Rama's carefully choreographed performance since the tragic explosion at Gerdec is a welcome demonstration of political maturity from the opposition. Under pressure to slam the government over the gravity of the incident, Rama and other SP party officials have consistently criticized in a temperate manner. While calling for the Prime Minister's resignation, Rama also led a Silent Protest of over 10,000 citizens last Friday, one of the most dignified and reserved events of its kind since the fall of communism, in a respectful tribute to those who perished at Gerdec.

13. (SBU) The images of disaster from Gerdec, the public anger over this government's failure, and allegations of corruption and government collusion have all contributed to a climate of public discontent. However, to the surprise and often anger of his party's leading activists, Rama has refused to take full advantage of the situation or ride the wave of public discontent beyond the protest staged last week. Acutely aware that a show of government instability in the days before the NATO decision could damage Albania's chances for entry, Rama has apparently chosen the high ground, either in the interest of NATO membership or to buy his own party time to regroup in case the current government cannot withstand the Gerdec crisis. Whatever the reason, this statesman-like quality is a welcome change in the opposition from its more divisive strategies of recent years.

14. (U) Brotherly Nations: Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan visited Albania March 26 during a Balkan tour that also included Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. In a visit twice postponed in 2007, Erdogan met with leaders including President Topi, Prime Minister Berisha, Speaker Topalli, and opposition leader Edi Rama. Confirming Albania's significant role in Turkish foreign policy, Erdogan reiterated Turkey's support for NATO membership. Albanian officials reciprocated with a nod for Turkey's EU membership bid as well as for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2009-2010. At a Turkish-Albanian Business Council meeting the two PMs expressed their determination to further strengthen trade and economic ties between their countries through a Free Trade Agreement signed in Tirana, which will take effect May 1. Finally, Erdogan pledged support for the proposed Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project for transport of natural gas from Turkey to Italy through Greece and Albania.

¶5. (SBU) Love Economic Style: Turkey has historically been an important strategic and economic partner for Albania. Good foreign relations with Turkey have aided in welcoming and balancing Greek influence in Albanian society. Turkey was the first country to grant Albanians visas upon arrival, without prior interview, and this has made Turkey a popular tourist (particularly honeymoon) destination. The country has also been a consistent and vital trade partner. Trade volume rose to \$347 million in 2007, up 37% from 2006 and six times higher than in 1999. Turkish foreign investments increased following the 2007 privatization of Albtelecom by the Turkish consortium Calik. Today, these investments are at \$630 million compared to \$35 million in 2002, throughout the infrastructure, mining, telecommunication, textiles, health, and education sectors. If love is based on a heavy purse, it looks like the devotion between these two will only strengthen in the future.

¶6. (U) Afraid of the Needle?: Recent events in Gerdec highlight another sub-standard sector in Albania: healthcare. The number of injuries on March 15 overwhelmed local hospitals, which had inadequate space and medical resources to treat the patients. Many facilities quickly ran out of basic medications and lack equipment to conduct proper examinations. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

¶7. (SBU) It is uniformly agreed that the healthcare system requires extensive and deep-rooted reform. Government funding is currently inadequate to support existing public hospitals. In smaller Albanian cities and villages, the problem is worse, as many clinics and hospitals are non-operational. If they are open to the public, their hours are limited, their staff lacks proper qualifications, and the facility lacks suitable medical supplies and equipment, sometimes including basic vaccines for newborns and other medicines.

Because health practitioners are among the lowest paid of any trained professionals, the healthcare system is among the most corrupted of public sectors, where extraneous "fees" are demanded

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for each lab test or type of medical care above the basic costs covered by the state. Those who can pay these bribes get better care, while those who cannot receive less attention and haphazard care. Individuals who diligently pay taxes into the socialized medical system are treated the same as those who pay nothing - there are no healthcare cards to distinguish between the two groups.

¶8. (U) In response to these conditions, private clinics have sprung up, where care and salaries are notably better, taking the best doctors and nurses away from public hospitals to these clinics, which remain beyond the means of the average Albanian.

THIS WEEK IN ARTS AND CULTURE

¶9. (U) Palace Concerts: The President of the Republic began a new tradition last year through a series of Palace Concerts. The first cultural initiative of its kind, its goal is to showcase talented Albanian and foreign musicians performing classical music for a selected audience. Invitees included government officials, members of parliament, representatives of the diplomatic corps, and other Albanian art and culture personalities. The concerts take place at the former Royal Palace of Albania, (the current official residence of President Topi, where President Bush was welcomed last year) adding prestige to the event.

¶10. (U) The first concert introduced an Albanian violinist Suela Mullaj, soloist and co-founder of the well known United Europe Chamber Orchestra based in Milan. She was accompanied by the Italian conductor, pianist and composer Massimo Palumbo. Ms. Mullaj has performed in more than 150 concerts in Europe with a repertoire that spans from baroque to the great romantic and modern music concerts.

¶11. (U) The series seeks to demonstrate the importance of promoting arts and culture, and that Albanian leaders can and must do more on this front. During Albania's years of post-communist transition

many talented artists left the country in search of better career opportunities. Despite many success stories from this diaspora, there has been little effort to inspire the Albania public with these talents, a situation President Topi hopes to amend.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

¶12. (U) "The Mafia is trying to keep Albania from entering into NATO. You gentlemen can save these accusations and use them as toilet paper." Excerpted from Prime Minister Berisha's response to opposition accusation in the wake of the New York Times' March 27 front page article on arms and ammunition sales to Afghanistan.

WITHERS